

Revelation

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Revelation, Reason, and Salvation

The idea of revelation, common to the three great monotheistic religions, is based upon the understanding of a personal God. What humans can know of God is not simply the result of human reason seeking to grasp the divine. It also entails God's actions of communicating something of himself and his will to human beings. In a Christian theology of revelation there has always been a very close relationship between this action of God's self-disclosure and human salvation, for the salvation of humankind is nothing else than communion with God. As the Second Vatican Council stated: "It has pleased God, in his goodness and wisdom, to reveal himself and to make known the secret purpose of his will (see Eph 1:9). This brings it about that through Christ, God's Word made flesh, and in his holy Spirit, human beings can draw near to the Father and become sharers in the divine nature (see Eph 2:18; 2 Pet 1:4)" (Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation §2).

Since the time of the Enlightenment there have been numerous challenges especially in the western world to the Christian understanding of revelation. Many of these can be grouped under the rubric of rationalism—the belief that reason alone is the basis for all knowledge. Such a position rules out a priori any possibility of divine revelation. At the other end of the spectrum is fideism—an exclusive reliance upon faith in the pursuit of religious truth. This position absolutizes the role of revelation to the exclusion of human reason. The orthodox Christian response is that revelation is in no way contrary to reason, but that the two are complementary. Christianity affirms that many truths about God can be known through natural observation and the use of human reason (see Rom 1:19-20). But knowledge about God is not the same as knowledge of God, who is the supernatural destiny of humankind and who transcends the capacity of human comprehension (see 1 Cor 2:9). True interpersonal knowing, even on a human level, necessitates more than knowing facts about another. It requires an encounter, an exchange, and above all the free self-disclosure of the other.

St. Thomas Aquinas argued for the necessity of divine revelation on this basis, stating that: "the human being is ordered to God as to a kind of end that exceeds the embrace of reason" (*Summa Theologiae* 1.1.1). To this he added that while some truths can be known about God by reason, this often comes about with great difficulty to only a few people and mixed with error. Revelation is fitting therefore in that salvific truth becomes accessible to all and it is freed from error.

In his encyclical letter on Faith and Reason, Pope John Paul II emphasized the complementarity of faith and reason and the limitations of each without the other. He writes: "Deprived of what Revelation offers, reason has taken side-tracks which expose it

to the danger of losing sight of its final goal. Deprived of reason, faith has stressed feeling and experience, and so run the risk of no longer being a universal proposition" (*Fides et Ratio* §48).

God's Revelation in Words and Deeds

When Christians speak of God's revelation, it is not uncommon that their first (and sometimes only) thought is to the revealed word of God—the Bible. Yet the Bible itself indicates an understanding of revelation that transcends its pages. First of all one might note the biblical insistence that God's creation is itself the first and most immediate act of God's revelation (see Ps 19:2; Rom 1:19-20). In the second place, much of the Bible speaks as a kind of witness to God's revelatory acts in human history. One cannot separate the books of the Old and New Testaments from the historical covenants they describe. Vatican II described the relationship in this manner: "The pattern of this revelation unfolds through deeds and words bound together by an inner dynamism, in such a way that God's works, effected during the course of the history of salvation, show forth and confirm the doctrine and the realities signified by the words, while the words in turn proclaim the works and throw light on the meaning hidden in them" (Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation §2).

The description of the plan of revelation by the Second Vatican Council essentially combined two models for understanding divine revelation: the propositional model with its emphasis on teaching or "words" and the historical model with its emphasis on "deeds." There are also other ways in which Christian theologians have talked about revelation such as "inner experience," dialectical presence," and "new awareness" (see Avery Dulles, *Models of Revelation*). This multiplicity of ways to speak about revelation highlights that revelation is first and foremost a mystery inasmuch as it belongs to the mystery of God. It is the mystery of the infinite and eternal God communing with finite human beings and "stoop[ing] down, as it were, 'to teach us God's inexpressible kindness, and how thoughtfully he has accommodated his way of speaking to our nature,'" (Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation §13 [citing John Chrysostom]).

This thoughtful accommodation on the part of God—or "divine pedagogy" as it is sometimes called—finds expression in the unfolding of salvation history via a progressive revelation. Beginning with Moses, God reveals himself to the people of Israel through the prophets who speak God's word to the people (see PROPHETS AND PROPHECY). God's eternal and infinite word is revealed in and through the human language of the prophets so as to become accessible to the people in their own time and place. Gradually, over time, God thus forms his people and leads them to an ever deeper understanding of his salvific will. For Christians, this mystery of God's word condescending to speak to us reaches its climax in the mystery of the Incarnation.

Revelation and Christ

Christianity sees the fullness of God's revelation manifested in the person of Jesus Christ (see Col1:15-20; Heb 1:1-4). As the Incarnation of the eternal Word of God, Christ

perfected revelation so that he could say: “whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9). St. John of the Cross forcefully expresses this totality of God’s revelation in Christ: “In giving us his Son, his only Word (for he possesses no other), he spoke everything to us at once in this sole Word—and he has no more to say” (*The Ascent of Mount Carmel* 2,22,3). It is for this reason that the Church says that “we now await no further new public revelation before the glorious manifestation of our Lord Jesus Christ” (*Dei Verbum* §4).

Although Christ is understood as the fullness of God’s revelation, the Church recognizes a universal intent and dimension to revelation as well. Early Christian writers such as Justin Martyr spoke of the *spermata tou Logou*, or “seeds of the Word” which God has providentially scattered among all humankind. Justin also affirms, however, that God’s revelation through the Word is more manifest among the Jewish people and reaches its fullness only in Christ. Vatican II reaffirmed this understanding in stating that: “all believers of whatever religion have always sensed the voice and manifestation of the creator in the utterances of creatures” (Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World §36). The Council also spoke of non-Christian religions as often reflecting “a ray of that truth which enlightens all men” (Declaration on Non-Christian Religions §2).

Just as the recognition that Christ is the mediator and fullness of God’s revelation does not negate a broader revelatory action by God among all peoples, so too this affirmation does not deny an ongoing process by which God’s revelation in Christ is developed in the Church. This development of doctrine does not constitute a new revelation but a “growth in understanding of what is handed on, both the words and the realities they signify” so that “the Church constantly holds its course towards the fullness of God’s truth, until the day when the words of God reach their fulfillment in the Church” (Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation §8). This is understood to be the ongoing action of the Holy Spirit who, in the words of Jesus, “will teach you everything and remind you of all that I told you” (John 14:26).

Bibliography

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Revelation - An Islamic View

Liyakat Takim

God, in the Islamic view, is both transcendent and immanent. He is the mighty, and the Conqueror yet He is also closer to human beings than their jugular veins (50:17). He is with human beings wherever they may be. Although the Qur’an employs human features to describe God, this sense of anthropomorphism does not allow God to assume a human

form. God, in Islamic theology, not only creates but He also communicates with humans. Since He cannot come down on earth, Islam maintains that God reveals His will to human beings through different Prophets at various times in human history. It is therefore correct to state that revelation is seen as a vehicle for God's self-disclosure. As 42:51 states, "God does not speak to human beings except through revelation or from behind a veil." In return, humans are expected to respond to the divine message.

According to Muslim sacred (the Qur'an and *hadith*) literature, the revelation to the Prophet Muhammad came in different forms. Sometimes, he would see the angel Gabriel, at other times, he would merely hear a voice or receive an inspiration. The term used for revelation in the Qur'an, *wahy*, is derived from the Arabic word *waha*, meaning to put in the mind. The Qur'an uses the term not only for divine communication to Prophets but also to indicate spiritual communication between created beings. Thus, the mother of Moses (28:7) and even bees receive God's revelation (16:68). However, this mode of communication is often interpreted by Muslim theologians as a form of inspiration rather than the revelation received by Prophets.

Besides the Qur'an, Muslims also accept the Torah, Psalms, the Gospel of Jesus, and other texts as vital links in the chain of divine revelation. The Qur'an also talks of scrolls given to Abraham and other Prophets mentioned in the Hebrew Bible. Thus, it would be correct to state that Islamic theology sees revelation as a gradual perfection of God's message in that the message speaks to people according to the needs of their times. In fact, the Qur'an sees itself as confirming the previous scrolls revealed by God. (5:48). In passages like chapter 37, 4:163, and 2:136, the Qur'an also indicates that there is a sense of continuity and a central theme in the revelation sent to various Prophet, i.e., the belief in one God and the need to establish a just social order based on ethical axioms that are ingrained in all human beings (30:30).

What is the purpose of revelation? Apart from revealing God's message, revelation is also meant to remind human beings of their responsibilities and duties to the divine and fellow human beings. Revelation is necessary as human beings are inherently forgetful, weak, and often sinful.

Muslim theologians have disagreed regarding the primacy of reason over revelation. Like the Shi'is, the Mu'tazilis, an important theological school in the eighth – tenth centuries, argued for the supremacy of reason over revelation. According to them, we can distinguish good from evil based on our rational capacities independently of revelation. Although important, the role of revelation for these theologians is secondary, for it merely provides details of what is established by reason. The Ash'aris, on the other hand, held a distinctly different view. They upheld the supremacy of revelation over reason. They maintained that we know what is right and wrong based on what God reveals to us. The Ash'ari doctrine has been very influential among Sunni Muslims. However, Maturidites who use reason with equal weight with revelation were the majority in Turkey, and through the Ottoman empire were widely influential in the Sunni world.

In recent times, Muslim thinkers have also seen the need to reinterpret the earlier understanding of the Qur'anic revelation especially as those interpretations were formulated based on the local socio-political milieu. This has led to new hermeneutics that emphasizes the universal, ethical precepts of the Qur'an over the particularistic, narrow, legalistic understanding of the Qur'anic message.

Points of Agreement:

Both Muslims and Christians agree that God reveals his will through prophets. Moreover, Muslims and Christians agree on many of the same prophets: Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and others are accepted as prophets in both religions.

Points of Disagreement

The main point of disagreement concerns the question of revelation given through Muhammad. Muslims believe that Muhammad was a prophet, and delivered revelation from God. Christians are divided on this point. Some Christians (e.g. Kenneth Cragg) do acknowledge that genuine revelation was given through Muhammad, but this is probably a minority view among Christians, though it is hard to say, because the subject is rarely even discussed in Christianity. No major Christian denomination has taken an official position on this subject.

Another point of disagreement would be the nature of the revelation given through Jesus Christ. While Muslims acknowledge Jesus as a prophet, who revealed God's will, many Christians think of Jesus as revealing God's being and person--God as self giving, self-sacrificing love.

A third point of disagreement would concern the Qur'an. For Muslims, the Qur'an is the inerrant word of God in Arabic. The Qur'an therefore has no human author; Muhammad was, to use a modern term, a channel through whom God revealed the Qur'an, but he did not contribute any of his ideas or thoughts to the Qur'an. While some Christians may acknowledge that there is revelation in the Qur'an, it is unlikely that a Christian would consider it inerrant revelation. Anyone who thought that the Qur'an is inerrant revelation would probably be or become a Muslim.

Points for Further Discussion

The most obvious point for discussion would be: to what extent can Christians grant that Muhammad was a prophet, who delivered genuine revelation concerning God?

Another point might be: does God reveal only God's will to us, or are there cases in which God reveals his nature and being?